

Why are changes needed? What is unemployment insurance? What has unemployment insurance become in this country? Originally the idea was to provide assistance to people should they lose their unemployment unexpectedly to tide them over financially until such time as they could find a new job. It is insurance in the unanticipated event of unemployment. In fact, unemployment insurance in Canada has gone away beyond that.

I remember some years ago when I was active in the teaching profession in the early seventies when changes were brought forward that allowed leave from your employment for a maternity benefit. It was something that was very much welcomed by the teaching profession which at that time was about 52 per cent women. It was a welcome benefit.

It really went against the concept of unemployment because the minute we start paying unemployment insurance to somebody who is on a leave of absence from their job, we have gone long beyond the concept of insurance against unemployment. There are a number of other circumstances for which unemployment insurance is paid to people. I guess we have to admit that what has happened in our society is that we have taken what was supposed to be an insurance scheme and really turned it into an income security scheme.

• (1750)

There are large sections of the country, like the one from which I come in Atlantic Canada, where in fact people who are employed part time for part of the year manage to sustain themselves and have their income supported in part by unemployment insurance throughout other parts of the year. This, of course, is true in the fishing industry where people cannot fish all year round, by decree of the government. That is how unemployment insurance got into the fishery in the first place. The government which ran the fishery closed it from time to time. Then, to make up for the fact that it was the government that would not let people work, it allowed them to draw unemployment insurance.

Now we have a whole scheme of unemployment insurance in the fishing industry. There are problems with that. I have had a number of people who know that I

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represent a constituency with a substantial number of people in the fishing industry say to me: Well, fishermen can go out and make a lot of money for a part of the year and then still be eligible to draw unemployment insurance, and that is not right. Certainly if a person makes a lot of money it is questionable whether they should be drawing unemployment insurance.

I think the point should be made in this House that there are an awful lot of fishermen in Nova Scotia who are eligible but do not draw unemployment insurance because they say their income is at a level where they should not. There are an awful lot of fishermen and plant workers who are seasonally employed who need that unemployment insurance in order to get by.

That is the way the thing has become. If we are going to have a scheme like this, should it be one that provides incentives or should it be one that provides disincentives? This is an issue that is often raised. I frequently have been approached by Christmas tree growers in my constituency who say they cannot get anybody to work, that they would rather sit home and draw unemployment insurance. That may be true or that may not be true, I cannot comment on that because I do not know. I do know that they would not come to my office if they were able to find people willing to work. Yet there are people in the same area who are in fact on unemployment insurance. Clearly there are problems with the system. It needs to be improved.

One of the improvements that this government made which I think is extremely important was the gradual shift of the concept from strictly a passive unemployment insurance system to an active one; the notion that somebody who was unemployed should just sit home until such time as they get a job. They visit the employment agency looking for work, but in the meantime they do not have an opportunity to improve their skills or develop further experience that will assist them to relocate themselves within the employment system. That lateral approach to me is a good one. That was the concept behind Bill C-21. Today we hear people talk, sometimes even from the other side of this House, about the need for adjustment programs as we as a country come to grips with the structural changes that are taking place in the world.